TidBITS
Thoughtful, detailed coverage of everything Apple for 35 years
and the TidBITS Content Network for Apple professionals

KEVIN SAVETZ 16 November 1998

# Move Over MTV, Now There's MP3

My foray into the world of MP3 music began not online, but while staring at the TV. A particular car commercial was airing for the hundredth time that night, featuring an infectious little song based on a tune called 88 Lines about 44 Women. I wanted to hear the song in its entirety and knew the Internet would be the key.

My musical craving would also mean a chance to play with MP3, a high-quality audio format that has become quite popular in some Internet circles.

A search of DejaNews revealed the tune I longed to hear was by a new wave band called The Nails. Finding that information was easy. Finding the song itself was another matter, involving a frustrating foray into the world of pirate Web sites that claim to offer free (although not legal) MP3 files. Ultimately I did find the song – legally – on the official Nails home page. My thirst for '80s new wave was quenched, but I learned volumes about MP3 in the process.

<http://www.dejanews.com/>

<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/ dakaufman/nails.html>

**First Things First** — MP3 stands for MPEG 1 layer 3: it's a file format for storing audio that can be replayed at near compact disc quality. The music sounds great. To my untrained ears, properly encoded MP3 files sound just as good as tunes from a CD. All it takes to play MP3 music is player software on your computer, which should be at least a PowerPC-based Mac (exact requirements vary by player). You also need something to listen to: MP3 files are available for download, or you can create them yourself from CDs you own.

Besides raw computing power, MP3 files require bandwidth and storage space. MP3 files weigh in at about one megabyte per minute of audio: your average pop song takes 3 or 4 MB; Arlo Guthrie's verbose Alice's Restaurant would run around 20 MB. In fact, MP3 files are amazingly small, taking up about 10 percent of the space of AIFF or other high-quality sound formats. (Like

JPEG is to graphics, MPEG is a lossy compression format – some information is lost in encoding, but not enough that most people would notice.) If you're downloading MP3s, come armed with a fast connection or prepare for a long wait. Even if you're encoding the files yourself, make sure you have enough disk space.

Detailed information about MP3 and related file formats is available at the MPEG Archive. The site includes a brutally technical FAQ, player downloads for many platforms, and other information.

<http://www.mpeg1.de/>

**Getting a Player** — To hear your fabulous MP3 song files, you need an MP3 player.

Windows users enjoy a veritable cornucopia of MP3 players, but Mac users have fewer choices, including the popular MacAmp and SoundApp. MacAmp's interface resembles the front panel of a compact disc player, complete with track timer and equalizer blinky lights. There's also a playlist: you can drag your MP3 files onto the playlist and move them around to tweak the order in which they play.

SoundApp offers a simpler interface. Although it can play sounds of many types other than MP3, SoundApp includes only a rudimentary playlist feature. A list of other players for the Macintosh can be found at MP3.com's archive of Mac software.

<http://www.macamp.com/>

<http://www-cs-students.stanford.edu/~franke/ SoundApp/>

<http://www.mp3.com/software/mac/players.html>

**Downloading MP3s** — There are two distinct types of MP3 files on the Internet – legal and illegal. Creators put legitimate MP3s online for you to enjoy: the people who own the copyright to the music have chosen to share. Legitimate MP3s songs are easy to find – and listening to them won't lead to an unsightly buildup of bad karma.

MP3.com reports that users downloaded more than two million songs from that site in September. According to the International Federation of Phonographic Industries, about 90 million MP3 files are downloaded each month – this presumably counts only legitimate ones.

The bad news? The mainstream recording industry hasn't embraced MP3, so legitimate recordings from well-known bands are rare. In fact, many people in the recording industry see MP3s as a major threat. Because it's so easy to create great-sounding MP3 files from a CD and share those files for free online, the recording industry stands to lose big bucks to do-it-yourself pirates who

would rather trade songs than pay for a CD. So chances are your favorite Top 40 group isn't yet on the MP3 bandwagon.

That said, a few well-known artists and labels are experimenting with MP3. Among them are the Beastie Boys, Dionne Warwick, and Taylor Dayne. Some make selected tracks available for free to spur sales of CDs, while others take the next step of selling MP3 tunes directly via the Internet.

Most of the music on legitimate MP3 Web sites is from bands you've never heard, covering every genre from blues to techno. Just because you've never heard of these bands doesn't mean they're lousy – in fact, I've discovered some great music. Then again, there's a reason that others of these bands lurk in obscurity: they stink.

Two sites with massive collections of free, legitimate MP3 music files are MP3.com and the Internet Underground Music Archive. Both let you search for music by genre, but your findings will almost always be a crap shoot if you don't recognize band names. If you're interested in hearing new music and indie bands, this is a great way to do so. You'll be pleasantly surprised when you find a great song – but brace yourself for the truly bad ones.

<http://www.mp3.com/>

<http://www.iuma.com/>

Illegal MP3s – music files shared without the permission of the copyright holders – also abound. If your favorite bands don't release MP3 music, folks on the Internet will do it for them. I could get on my soapbox and yammer about why piracy is wrong, but I won't. I'll just say this: trying to get music from pirate MP3 sites is a pain in the Hootie.

The sites are easy to find in search engines, but then you'll run into dead links galore, since ISPs quickly shut down such pirate sites. Sites that do exist may only offer a handful of songs for download (but claim to have an archive of thousands). Other sites require you to upload a song for each one that you download. I'm no expert in the pirate MP3 scene, and maybe I don't know where to look, but two hours of searching the online backwaters yielded few MP3 files, none of which I even cared to hear.

An MP3 guru tells me Usenet is the tool of choice for receiving pirate MP3s, feeding two to three gigabytes of MP3 files daily, and accounting for more than 10 percent of all Usenet bandwidth.

**Roll Your Own** — Sharing copyrighted music is illegal, but it is legal to create MP3 files for your own use from CDs you own. Encoding a single song or an entire CD is simple if you're armed with a CD-ROM drive and encoding software. Creating an MP3 file from a CD track is a two-step process: first, you convert the CD audio to a file format native to the computer such as AIFF – this

process is called ripping. Next, you convert that file to an MP3 file in a process called encoding. Depending on the software you use, ripping and encoding can be a one-step or two-step process.

You could rip your favorite tracks from otherwise forgettable CDs to create a "best of" MP3 mix folder. If you have removable storage like a Zip or Jaz drive, you could put those MP3 files onto a removable cartridge and enjoy your tunes whenever you're in the mood. (Giving copies of those files to anyone or uploading them to the Internet is copyright infringement.)

The only one-step Mac ripper/encoder I've found on the Internet is MPEG Audio Creator, which is easy to use. However, it can create only MPEG 1 layer 2 files (dubbed MP2), an older version and slightly larger version of the file format.

<http://www3.pair.com/odreer/mpeg.html>

Until someone writes a Mac MP3 ripping/encoding tool, creating true MP3 files requires two programs. You first use CDtoAIFF to create an AIFF file from a CD track. Then Mpecker Encoder turns that AIFF into an MP3 file.

<http://www.musicglobalnetwork.com/Mac.html>

<http://www.anime.net/~go/mpeckers.html>

Encoding an MP3 file is an intensive process, so be prepared to see a lot of the busy cursor.

There you have it: the story of how an incessant car commercial got me hooked on a forgotten '80s band, led me to learn more than I thought I wanted to know about MP3, and caused me to use every last bit of hard drive space to store countless music files. I gotta stop watching so much TV.

[Kevin Savetz writes about Macs and the Internet for Computer Shopper and other magazines. An avid collector of vintage computers, Kevin is as likely to be playing with an Atari 800 or Timex-Sinclair as with his Mac.]

Cookies & Privacy: We wish we were talking about chocolate-chip cookies here, but our Web site—like nearly all others—relies on a few minor digital cookies. Various laws around the world require us to tell you that fact, so consider yourself informed, if not nourished. By continuing to use this site, you agree to our use of these cookies. Cookie and Privacy Notice

Close and Accept